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ABSTRACT

The Graduate Assistant Orientation at New Mexico State University is described. The objective of the orientation is to provide teaching assistants (TAs) with excellent role models for university teaching. The orientation, which is voluntary, communicates to TAs that feelings of uncertainty are understood by the staff. The manner in which the orientation is organized has made it a major event at the beginning of each fall semester. Twelve workshops were developed by master teachers and all were based on the premise that teaching can be learned, practiced, and continually improved. Several workshops deal with the topic of good organization. Alternative methods to the lecture are addressed, along with the effectiveness of different teaching methods. Additional areas addressed by the orientation workshops include: the usefulness of a properly prepared syllabus, goal and priority setting for all graduate assistants and techniques for coping with stress, methods of projecting enthusiasm, knowledge of the subject matter, understanding what to expect from freshman students, knowledgeability about campus facilities and services such as the library, the computer center, and counseling services, and group instructional skills. (SW)

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IMPROVING SKILLS OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS

by

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IMPROVING SKILLS OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS

Introduction

New Mexico State University offers teaching assistantships to the most qualified graduate students. Ten years ago, a small group of graduate assistants approached the director of the Center for Learning Assistance and requested help in preparing for the first day of class. They came with several of the following questions that all educators will find familiar:

1. I've never taught before. What should I do in order to survive the first class meeting?
2. How do I grade students?
3. How will I be evaluated?
4. What if I don't know the answer to a student's question?
5. What is the university's policy regarding attendance?
6. What is considered a normal academic load for a graduate student with a teaching assistantship?
7. How friendly should I be with students?
8. How should I handle disruptive classroom situations?
9. What should I do if I suspect someone of cheating?
10. How do I become a skilled teacher?
11. Who is my supervisor?
12. How much work am I expected to perform?
13. How will my performance be measured?

Their expressions of doubt and insecurities were coupled with a lack of clarity about the exact nature of their responsibilities. At the same time, reports had been filtering back from the departments to the Graduate School that TAs were poorly prepared for teaching. At the very least, there was a

lack of classroom presence. They were excellent students in their own disciplines, but they lacked teaching skills. Clearly, something had to be done.

THE GRADUATE ASSISTANT ORIENTATION

We believe that much of what is involved in passing knowledge on to others can be learned, practiced, and continually improved. By learning the skills necessary for successful teaching, a new teaching assistant is able to meet the responsibilities of classroom instruction while coping with the inevitable anxieties of life as a graduate student. Successful teaching depends as much on the theory as on the technique used.

Research has identified the following as four elements of effective teaching (1):

1. Good organization
2. Enthusiastic presentation
3. Knowledge of the subject
4. Group instructional skills

Each of these elements can be learned. Teaching these elements to beginning TAs requires an atmosphere of support, respect, and a nonthreatening environment. These attributes instill a sense of pride, confidence, and professionalism in a TA and will surely contribute to effective classroom teaching.

What evolved from all this came to be known as the Graduate Assistant Orientation (GAO). The orientation, which had a modest beginning in 1975, was a three-hour seminar attended by 30 TAs. In 1985, the GAO was attended by over 230 graduate assistants and included events scheduled over a one-and-a-half day period. The aspirations we held for the first seminar ten

years ago, remain intact today. They involve the participation of our most experienced professors who model good teaching, acknowledge the difficulty of the TAs' position, and inform them where help is to be found.

Twelve workshops were developed by faculty considered to be master teachers. They were all based on the premise that teaching can be learned, practiced, and continually improved. Workshops were also conducted by experienced TAs who were known to be successful.

One element of successful teaching is good organization. Several workshops deal with this topic. For example, Dr. Karen Smith, one of the founders of the GAO and currently the director of our Center for Learning Assistance, often conducts a workshop titled Delivering Instruction: Some Alternatives to Lecturing. This workshop helps TAs to see that they are not doomed to stand rigidly behind a podium for 16 weeks. Alternative methods to the lecture are considered and the effectiveness of these methods is explored.

A workshop titled How to Develop a Syllabus gives TAs the background and purpose of providing students with a syllabus. The usefulness of a properly prepared syllabus is also considered. We do not expect that beginning TAs will be asked to prepare their own syllabi, but they will surely have to use them and will eventually be required at least to assist in revision or preparation of them.

A major part of organization requires TAs to order the priorities of their own lives, their classes, research, and their teaching assignments. It may appear commendable for a TA to spend 40 hours a week on the teaching assignment but survival in the academic world may be compromised. One workshop that is particularly effective in this area is presented by the director of the University Counseling Center. Her workshop, Stress and the

GA, offers realistic goal and priority setting for all graduate assistants and offers several techniques for coping with stress.

Enthusiastic presentation is an element of effective teaching that has contributed greatly to the myth that "good teachers are born not made" or that only charismatic people can hope to be skilled teachers (2). On the first day of the orientation, the entire assembly of registered graduate assistants attends a workshop called, The Lecture and Lab Method of Teaching. For this important workshop, professors are chosen who have received the highest awards for teaching excellence. The workshop is filled with humor, sensitivity, enthusiasm, and a love of teaching. The workshop emphasizes the concept that like other skills, methods of projecting enthusiasm can be systematically learned. The presenters stress the idea that teaching is hard work but that it is an occupation filled with joyful and fullfilling experiences.

Knowledge of the subject matter is a prerequisite for any TA. The orientation proceeds on the assumption that each TA has satisfactorily mastered his or her subject matter. We have also found that TAs need to understand who their students are, what their level of understanding is, and how far they can be stretched. Our Vice President for Student Affairs presents a workshop on What to Expect From the Freshman Student. She gives the TAs valuable information concerning demographics, race, and socioeconomic origins for the average student entering college.

A panel discussion by eight members of the faculty and staff describes services that are available for all students and faculty. TAs need to be knowledgeable not only about their major discipline and their students, but also about facilities on campus such as library services, counseling

services, computer center, statistical services, legal advice, disciplinary policies, and the Center for Learning Assistance.

Group instructional skills are an element of effective teaching that can add variety and spice to the classroom at the university level. An example of one of our workshops that focuses on this area is called Developing Effective Communication. As the title implies, this workshop offers skills in group facilitation by increasing the level of communication not only between students and teachers but also among students. This workshop points out that out of class interactions among students are an important part of university learning.

Each year, new workshops are added and old workshops that no longer seem relevant to TAs are dropped. This year we added Sexism in the Classroom and Indian Cultures of New Mexico.

We don't presume to make TAs into master teachers in a two day period. But in this rather brief and intense orientation, we can stimulate the TAs to seek out help when they need it. When problems do arise in the classroom, the TAs will know where to go for help if their own ideas and resources seem inadequate. Throughout the orientation, we stress the importance and availability of supervision and help from departmental faculty.

PLANNING FOR THE GRADUATE ASSISTANT ORIENTATION

The GAO has gone through a metamorphosis over the past ten years from a small workshop attended only by a handful of graduate assistants to the presently well attended event that is firmly established on our campus. There are several reasons for the success of this program.

The primary reason is the quality of the orientation itself. Our purpose is to provide TAs with excellent role models for university teaching and through the help of our faculty, we have been able to do so.

Secondly, the Graduate Assistant Orientation has been instrumental in communicating to teaching assistants that their feelings of uncertainty are understood by the faculty and the administration. By acknowledging the fears and anxieties of teaching assistants and by giving instructional support and encouragement, we hope to attain the goal of promoting and achieving quality instruction.

Thirdly, the manner in which the Graduate Assistant Orientation is organized has resulted in making it a major event at the beginning of each fall semester. The Orientation is held the week before classes start in the fall. We begin planning during spring semester and continue throughout the summer.

All levels of faculty, staff, and administration are involved and participate voluntarily and enthusiastically in the workshops and social activities. Department heads receive notice of the scheduled date by June and are urged to encourage their graduate assistants to attend. It is important to note that attendance by GAs is also voluntary. All graduate assistants are personally invited by letter from the Dean of the Graduate School. We have considered requiring attendance but we continue to believe that the quality of the orientation would be diminished if attendance were mandatory.

When all workshops have been planned, a tentative schedule is sent to department heads and other administrators so that they can allow time in their own schedules for attending appropriate sessions. Graduate assistants

are also given an adequate amount of time to fit the orientation into their schedules.

On the first day of the orientation, students are welcomed by the President of NMSU and the Dean of the Graduate School. The dean outlines responsibilities of teaching assistants and invites them to use the office of the Graduate School for needed assistance. The dean also urges them to make use of the publications Ready, Set, Teach! and the Graduate Handbook. Both publications are edited by the Graduate Assistant Training Coordinator in the office of the Graduate School and are designed specifically for graduate students on our campus.

Ready, Set, Teach!, is a handbook on teaching for graduate assistants. The handbook is a collection of essays on teaching, written by professors at New Mexico State University. Graduate assistants identified what areas the handbook should address and solicited faculty assistance in producing it. Teaching styles, methods and tools are discussed. Copies are available upon request.

The Graduate Student Handbook provides information about the campus, the facilities available, housing, graduate student organizations, instructions on oral examinations and recreational information. The handbook is particularly helpful to graduate students who are new to the campus. Copies of this handbook are also available upon request.

The social aspect of the program is important. The graduate assistants are treated to complimentary coffee and pastries at each workshop. A social hour with beer and refreshments is held at a nearby hotel. At the social, members of the graduate faculty and graduate council, department heads, associate deans, deans, vice presidents and the president are on hand to greet each graduate assistant personally. This is also a time for the new

graduate assistants to meet one another and to generate a spirit of comraderie that is so important to graduate training and professional development. Students, faculty and administration are encouraged to get to know one another on a personal level rather than the typical student-faculty relationship which can inhibit personal interaction.

On the last day of the orientation, graduate assistants are invited to a luncheon sponsored by the Graduate School. In order to facilitate personal interaction, great care is taken in orchestrating the seating arrangement. There is no head table, but a ballroom filled with round tables that can seat 8-10 people. In this arrangement, conversation flourishes. Just in case conversation does not flourish, we have provided each table with a facilitator. The facilitator is identified as the person who happens to sit at a place where a saucer has been marked by a red dot. A few moments into the luncheon, GAs are asked to check their saucer for a red dot. The persons so identified are requested to make introductions at their tables. For this service, the facilitators are given a small gift. This acts as a method of promoting friendly interaction and allows students who are new to the University to take the first step toward making the friendships that are so important during their years as a graduate students. Following the lunch, a speaker (usually someone well known in the community) addresses the group on one or more themes covered in the orientation.

Each participant is given an evaluation form to complete. Most changes that we make are based on these evaluations. The respondents are asked to rate each workshop and each social event on a seven point scale. Each respondent is also asked to give suggestions for additional workshops.

A full report is made to the executive vice president and copies of this report are sent to department heads, deans and to each faculty person who was

a participant in the orientation. The apparent cost of the orientation is currently about $3500. This is not the full cost since the efforts of faculty members, other graduate assistants and the keynote speaker are donated. Our most significant costs are printing, the luncheon, and the social.

DISCUSSION

We have found a paucity of literature on this subject. Few universities offer a centrally administered Graduate Assistant Orientation (3). Many departments within universities offer training programs for their TAs but these are specific to the discipline represented. Some of the universities that offer programs similar to ours are Stanford University, University of Maryland and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Over the past year, we have attempted to set up an exchange of information with universities that present orientation programs for teaching assistants so that we may all learn from each other.

We conclude with some typical comments made by TAs who attended the orientation in the fall of 1985.

> "This was an excellent orientation. More universities should have this type of program. It has given me a sense of welcome, purpose and community as well as good general info. Thanks!"
>
> "NMSU has an excellent attitude toward its students overall and that attitude of concern was emphasized to the GAs. I feel the results will be far reaching. It made me feel at home and increased my desire to promote the school and to give that extra to the students."
>
> "I enjoyed the Orientation tremendously. It helped me to relax and focus. It was a marvelous opportunity to meet students from other areas."

We are pleased with the overall results from our ten-year history of serving the needs of teaching assistants. We will continue to monitor orientation outcomes which include

1. Lack of negative comments from undergraduates
2. More confidence reported by TAs going into their teaching responsibilities
3. Departments have used our orientation as a model for their own training

We would encourage other universities to offer an orientation program to graduate assistants and we hope this presentation will assist you in this effort. Thank you.